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If you find mistakes in this magazine, please remember that they are there for a purpose. We try to publish something for everyone, and some people are always looking for mistakes.

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**editor/publisher/designed  
and struggled with  
Chris Blackford**

# VOX

**Little** did they know: the cabbies, the King's Cross hookers, the punters swarming around the amusement arcade, that ten minutes up the Euston Road minds were reeling at "the world's leading festival of improvised music". Company Week entered its fourteenth year; this year at The Place Theatre, WC1. It is, to quote a phrase from its founder, Derek Bailey, "a non-promotional idea", an eccentric incongruity in a climate where most music grooves to the rhythm of the marketplace. **Company Week 1991** was nine musicians, some of whom had not previously met, let alone alone worked together; one or two were new to improvised music; as usual there were no rehearsals or pre-gig discussions about the structure of what was to be played; just straight from the *tabula rasa* every night for five nights. 'Free improvisation' is exactly that.

The purpose of this special issue is not to review the Week's performances, to attempt to describe and evaluate a concentration of diverse musical happenings, rather, to give space (in the form of a collection of interlocking interviews/conversations) to ideas about the unique challenges of improvised music, the importance, if any, of traditional musical backgrounds/techniques to the improviser, the position of the audience in relation to this music, and so on. Of the nine musicians who comprised Company, this time, six were interviewed. Since Paul Rogers (bass) was interviewed for **Rubberneck 8** it was decided not to repeat the process on this occasion. The Americans, Buckethead (guitar) and John Zorn (alto saxophone), declined to be interviewed for reasons best known to themselves.

If you've read this far and don't know a thing about improvised music, **please read on**. If, by the end, you think you might like to hear the music itself, why not send off for the various catalogues advertised in the magazine. The record companies herein all specialise in improvised music.

Chris Blackford  
September 1991

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## VANESSA MACKNESS

### *voice*

**Caterwauling** or sonorous: abstract and poetic. Vanessa Mackness carries on the demanding and mysterious tradition of improvised singing, pioneered by fellow Britons, Phil Minton and Maggie Nicols. Recently, she has worked with percussionists Tebe Lipere and Louis Moholo. Next year she intends to sing opposite Minton in Tom Phillips' opera, *Irma*.

**VM** I haven't had a musical training. I originally came to London to study painting at Camberwell and after a few years I became disillusioned with that. Actually Phil Minton lived on the same estate as me in Deptford and we met and sort of spontaneously started singing together. It was like a dream when I heard him singing, and I just wanted to do what he was doing. Then I started to do a few workshops with Maggie Nicols, and slowly people began to introduce me to other musicians. I never tried to get gigs, but slowly it builds, and it sort of developed almost organically over the past seven or eight years.

*Improvised singing strikes me as a very vulnerable context in which to work. I mean, you don't have the distance that the instrumentalist has. You're there, it's your voice. It's a very direct form of expression.*

**VM** Yes, you are incredibly vulnerable. When I'm at home using the piano with my voice it's a lot different. I've got something to back up the sound, something for the voice to sit in. It's strange, you must have some real communication with the people that you're playing with; there must be some way of linking. I think I've been very fortunate in that respect.

I like that feeling of just throwing yourself into the dark, throwing yourself off the edge of the world and you've no idea what's going to happen. Of course, I'm limited by my voice, limited by what I can do. I did have some singing lessons just to learn how to place my voice, but really you're not thinking, you're doing.

*Do you practice at home in order to develop new techniques, new sounds?*

**VM** Well, I sort of discover them. It took me a long time to understand what it was I had to do. I asked Phil Minton what he did to warm up before a gig. He told me to do everything very quietly. I adore Indian music, so I put that on and sing with it because they're improvising and doing certain scales. It's very beautiful and complex music. The way they sing the same thing over and over again, the way they punctuate the rhythm. But most of it I have to discover. I mean I could be lying there in the bath and (*two or three weird noises follow*) . . . I can't actually catalogue the sounds and say I'm going to use them later. You just have to allow things to happen. You have to saturate yourself in all sorts of sounds.

*Apart from one or two snatches, I noticed that you don't often sing actual words.*

**VM** Well, I do use them, but I like to use them in mysterious ways so that they suddenly appear and you can't always hear everything, so that they're slightly obscured. I like to listen to the sound of people speaking, in pubs where you hear odd words from conversations. That sort of thing fascinates me. I prefer to use words like that rather than in the form of poetry or dialogue.

*In a more abstract way, perhaps?*

**VM** Yes, in a kind of abstract way. I think of haiku, although that's rather sophisticated, but sometimes a little spiral of words will come out which has meaning, which is quite clear.

*I wonder whether your being a woman in a predominantly male atmosphere has any bearing on the music?*

**VM** I sometimes think, as corny as it sounds, that the female has an enormous effect on what the men are doing. I'm like this female soul put into this very male dominated context and I sometimes like to do something that's quite stirring, that works against all of these kinds of conceptual things that they might be doing, so that they're moved in a different way. Yes, as a woman I feel I can have a very valid influence on what's happening musically.

*Can you sense a growing maturity in the way you perform, the way you improvise?*

**VM** Yes, I can. The things that initially you want to do, you can't do. Even if it's something simple like space. You listen to some improvisors and they just can't seem to stop playing their instruments in a piece. For them it would be an enormous step to take just to be quiet for a moment. I have this thing about space, in the sound and outside the sound. There are some very simple things that I've set myself that I haven't yet mastered. I have a real sense of developing which I hope I can continue. I think if you didn't feel that you were growing, you couldn't improvise. It would be the wrong world for you to be moving in.

Improvisation is about something developing, something growing. You have to be prepared to take risks. Sometimes I feel that I've made a terrible fool of myself. But then I think, no. You have to be prepared for that. I think gradually you develop a way of being able to say less. I think the more mature

musicians really have a sense of that. Maybe you could hear that in the last piece we did tonight. Everybody didn't just dive in and go totally mad. They waited, and built the piece gradually. That really does take maturity. It also requires patience, both from the musicians and the audience. **R**



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# PAUL LOVENS

## *percussion*

**Paul** Lovens is one of the most experienced and versatile percussionists playing improvised music today. Consequently, he's played with just about everybody who's anybody in the field; from the Globe Unity Orchestra, to the vital Alex Von Schlippenbach Trio with Evan Parker and the duos with Paul Lytton. A selection of his numerous recordings is available on his own Po Torch label.

**PL** I must have been about nine or ten years old when I was at this funeral service. There were a couple of people from the dead man's family there. There was no singing, only the organ playing. A very solemn atmosphere. The church was, of course, very big, very empty and very cold. It was before I played the drums. I remember sitting there with all that space around me. Quite an impact!

*An important musical moment?*

**PL** Not just musical, but for facing the world.

*Perhaps we could talk about your musical beginnings. I know that you are self-taught. Was there music in the family to encourage you?*

**PL** Well, my mum sang in a choir and my dad played the drums, but there was no music happening. My sisters were both older than me. They were at the right age to run into Elvis Presley. So I was the little brother watching them and listening to the records. Also, I heard Chris Barber. I don't know what I made of it all at the time. Then I listened to hit parades and fell for Dionne Warwick. Two months after my

dad died I saw a drum set in a shop window and I said to my mother, "I need this now."

*This was to keep a tradition alive in the family?*

**PL** No, not really. I never really knew much about my father playing the drums. As a young boy he probably played in a marching band, but not much involved, not that committed. Music was always around. In the days before there was much television there was always music around any family. So there was no special musical upbringing.

*Was your first group a jazz group with you playing drums?*

**PL** The group was a Dixieland group, playing 'When the Saints Come Marching In' and copying Louis Armstrong and stuff like that. Maybe Chris Barber was influential because he was the first contact with this kind of rhythm, this kind of swing. But the first important record which made some kind of switch, but not yet a click (there's a switch but you hear the click maybe three years later) was 'More Than You Know' with Sonny Rollins and Monk, Prestige records. Everybody should know that song. That was something that grabbed me at a place I didn't know I had in me. I was about fourteen-sixteen years old, I suppose.

*Were there any drummers you wanted to be like at that age?*

**PL** I wanted my small tom to sound like Art Blakey's tom. When he plays in that trio with Monk and they're playing 'Nuttty' . . . I discovered this years later. It's this early Rudy Van Gelder recording and there's this strange reverb on this old Gretsch set. Of course, Art Blakey had tuned it this way. I didn't realise the drums

could sound like that. So that's something I'll never forget. Personal reference stuff.

*When did you decide that you wanted to become a serious performing musician?*

**PL** When I was still at school. I played in that Dixieland group and played dance music at the weekends in another group. Then, on one summer school event, I met the trumpet player, Manfred Schoof. And a couple of months later he asked me to play in his group. That's where I met Alex Schlippenbach. Since then Alex has been my teacher and Evan Parker, who joined the trio soon afterwards. So this is how it all started.

*You mention Manfred Schoof and Alex Schlippenbach, it sounds as though Germany was a fertile place to begin a career in improvised music?*

**PL** Not that it's a recommendation, but at the time I started there was no real centre for doing things. You could have a gig in every major city, not only in Berlin. In fact Germany and Switzerland are where I've played most of the time.

*Was Schlippenbach's Globe Unity Orchestra something of a breeding ground for improvisors?*

**PL** I wouldn't say it was a breeding ground exactly. I think the best breeding ground is the *provenance*, people being on their own and being hungry, and then presenting something. At that stage they were called into the orchestra.

*What is it that you've found attractive about free improvisation?*

**PL** I like to play with people more than once, to find things out. There's always this void, this

emptiness, when you meet them for the first time. It makes you play safe, in terms of introducing many things that change the process of development of material. So I feel much more in danger the second time with the same people, because you've already got rid of your routines. I've never got to the state of holding back my routines when I first play with someone.

**If you ask me, "Would you rather play once for five thousand people or a hundred times for fifty people?", I'd choose the latter. I want them close!**

*You've been playing for many years, I imagine you've noticed a development in improvised music?*

**PL** You imply that I'm looking at it with a cool eye. I don't think I do. *(Long pause)* Maybe it can't do anything but develop. As soon as it doesn't develop it goes stale and it dies immediately. It's this kind of organism that cannot survive without constant fresh input. I don't think improvised music could have the same fate as a Mozart opera, for example.

*In what respect?*

**PL** Well, improvised music cannot be ironed out, it can only be played by the people who do it. For example, nobody would buy a score of a Derek Bailey solo improvisation and try to do it. But these people who might in other fields of music try to play a score, have to sit and listen to improvised music.

*Talking of the audience, I don't suppose the*

*improvising musician can ever expect to become complacent about the number of people who are likely to turn up for a gig. I mean, there are still a vast number of so-called 'jazz fans' who aren't interested in free music.*

**PL** Well, I've never played the Theatre of Verona, or had the sort of audience of Michael Jackson or Sting, so I can't really say it's not the sort of thing I want. But if you ask me, "Would you rather play once for five thousand people or a hundred times for fifty people?", I'd choose the latter. I want them close! **R**

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## PAT THOMAS

### *piano & electronics*

**At 32**, Pat Thomas is one of a 'second generation' of British improvisors making a serious impact on free music. His approach to electronics is, to say the least, original: an expanding sonic universe where big-bangs take their cues from *Gardeners' Question Time*.

**PT** I got into jazz watching the box and seeing Oscar Peterson.

*Was this the series where he invited people like Keith Emerson and Rick Wakeman to play?*

**PT** Yeah, that's it. Hilarious! And I was listening to that and I thought that'll be easy, I could do that. You know, you've got this illusion that if you've had a classical training you'll be able to do anything. He was improvising, which I tried, but obviously not at that level. Then I started listening to the little snatches of jazz on Radio 2 and then moved on to Radio 3. About 1979 I started playing my first serious improvised gigs. Ian McLaughlin was the first person I played anything free with. From 1980-86 I played with Ghosts, which was Pete McPhail and Matt Lewis.

*Would you say that your classical training had prepared you for playing improvised music, or has it been something of a hindrance?*

**PT** Yes, in the beginning, definitely. Classical techniques of playing are completely useless in this area of music, you find yourself unlearning them. You have to start shaping the technique for the music when you play improvised music, instead of just using it as some sort of virtuoso thing. This is a totally different context for playing.

Playing reggae years ago has actually come in useful, though. I used to improvise then, but not at the level of jazz improvisation. Things I did learn from reggae, because I was playing piano and didn't know about digital electronics, were things like doing little tricks like playing with the sustain pedal, and if you play in five it makes it sound like an echo effect. At the time we didn't know there were things like delay and echo chambers. When we saw Aswad we thought, "So that's how they do it. They've got these little boxes!" We'd spent all this time trying to play out of time so that we could pretend we were a dub section. It was good fun, though. We'd also play calypso and a lot of boogie woogie. That's a good way of starting.

**Classical techniques of playing are completely useless in this area of music, you find yourself unlearning them.**

Improvised music, though, is the ultimate goal. All your practice can be completely meaningless in this situation. You've just got to go out there and play. You've no idea what's going to happen. You have to open yourself up to what everybody else is playing. I think it's that challenge of not knowing, that I really enjoy, of not being able to say, "It's okay, I can rely on a few licks". Even in a jazz context, if things are going badly you can always go on to your licks and impress people. It's the old famous one isn't it. "If the gig's going, you can always blind them with science". In improvised music you can't do that sort of thing.



*It seems to me that you do more pre-gig preparation than most because of your use of tapes and samples etc. How do you go about collecting these?*

**PT** I'll take time off to programme the sounds, concentrating on one sound and building it up bit by bit. As far as the tapes are concerned I'll probably just sit in front of the TV and tape whatever's going on and do some editing afterwards to decide what might be useful. I haven't started taping *Neighbours* yet! Mind you, I love recording commercials. The Diet Pepsi one is my favourite at the moment. But I don't actually put a label on each tape saying what's on there, so when I come to use them I don't know what I'm going to be playing. That obviously prevents me from setting things up. I pick them up at random and see what happens. So I'm just as surprised as anybody else at what comes out (*laughs*).

**"If the gig's going, you can always blind them with science". In improvised music you can't do that sort of thing.**

*Hopefully that hasn't led to any problems with other players. I was wondering what Paul Rogers was going to make of that weather forecast when it came on tonight.*

**PT** No, it seems to be all right. For me it's a bit of a life-saver because I might have ended up going into a cliché. Though it can be quite amusing sometimes. At least nobody's tried to attack me on stage, yet!

*A couple of years ago I understand you got some Arts Council money to fund an ambitious electronics project. Could you describe what*

*that was about?*

**PT** Yes, it was a ten-piece featuring Roger Turner and Matt Lewis on percussion, Pete McPhail - WX7 wind synth, Neil Palmer - turntables, Phil Minton - vocals, Phil Durrant - violin, Marcio Mattos - bass, Jon Corbett - trumpet, Geoff Searle - drum machines, and myself - computers. My intention was to feature different aspects of electronics using improvisation. One piece featured Pete McPhail playing the WX7 and Neil Palmer. That was called 'Dialogue'. Then there was a piece for percussionists and drum machines, which was very interesting, and also a piece featuring Phil Minton and Jon Corbett improvising with a computer.

*Yes, I seem to remember George Lewis doing something like that with an interactive computer with supposedly spontaneous results.*

**PT** Well, strictly speaking the computer can never really improvise. It can only do what you tell it to do. I studied Artificial Intelligence, and basically what you put into a computer is what you get out of it. All you really get is random playing from the computer, and randomness is not the same as improvisation. You're making split-second decisions all the time you're improvising, whereas a computer is just following certain numbered programmes. The musicians actually make it sound meaningful. The computer is playing at random, it hasn't got what you'd call 'ideas' of its own, but it stretches the musicians because they've got this thing that can't really react to them and they've got to think, "How can I play with this?" I think *that's* the interesting challenge.

*There is, of course, this other branch of people involved in electro-acoustic music in this country, people like Denis Smalley, Jonty Harrison, Tim Souster etc. Perhaps they're coming from more of a classical direction? Do*



*you have any contact with them?*

**PT** I'd like to, but I don't seem to be able to get in with them. I'm a member of Sonic Arts, which used to be the Electro-acoustic Music Association. It's a very closed circuit. It seems to revolve around City University in London or York University, and if you haven't been a past student you don't seem to get a look in. By the time I get to hear about their events, it's usually too late. Also, I think their approach to electronics is quite a bit dated. It seems that they haven't moved on much from 1963 somehow. Recently, I heard Joseph Alvarez using a Fairlight and I thought how straight it sounded. A lot of the things he was doing, he could have achieved without using electronics. Because it's such a closed circuit it generates rather a formal approach, and I don't think you can really work with electronics in that way. You've got to be moving with it all the time. Electronics are tailor-made for musicians involved in improvised music. **R**

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## ALEXANDER BALANESCU

### *violin*

**Best** known for his work with the composer Michael Nyman, who speaks of his "stunning virtuosity". Put to splendid use in a variety of contexts, including three years with the Arditti Quartet. Formed the enterprising Balanescu Quartet in 1987, further extending the classical repertoire. More recently involved in composing for the cinema as well as television documentaries.

**AB** I started playing the violin at the age of six and had a wonderful teacher who dedicated a lot of her time to me. Then I started giving concerts around the age of nine. This was in Bucharest. My family emigrated to Israel in 1969 and I continued my studies there for a year. After that I came to London to study. In 1975 I went on to New York, to the Julliard School where I sort of finished my studies, and returned again to this country and started to be involved in new music. I got very interested in new music during my years in New York. There was a lot of stuff going on in Soho, the lofts and the downtown scene.

At this time I was still playing classical music, but I felt that it would be restricting just to concentrate on the repertoire. At the Julliard there seemed to be a norm, an accepted way of playing a certain piece and a more individualistic way of playing wasn't really accepted. I wanted to develop a more individual way of playing and also widen my perspective on music which, until the age of eighteen or nineteen, had been very protected. Although as a kid I had been listening to jazz. I had quite a large collection of jazz ranging from Jelly Roll Morton, Earl Hines to Ornette Coleman and free jazz. That, as a statement in freedom, was important to me.

*I know this is your first experience of playing at Company Week, what attracted you to this improvisation environment?*

**AB** It's a great adventure. It's also a learning process for me. Every night I find things out about myself as well as the other musicians. It gives me a lot of strength. This is quite a difficult thing for a classically trained musician to be doing. You don't have the music to hide behind, you are very much on the line. After each night I feel a sense of achievement because I've gone through it and managed to express something.

*You find that fear stimulates you?*

**AB** Yes, I do.

*I was wondering what your classical colleagues might think of you because you're prepared to put yourself in this rather exposed context. Perhaps a bit of an oddball?*

**AB** Yes, I think so, but people respect the courage of someone who is prepared to take risks. I think I'm known anyway for taking risks even in the classical repertoire.

*Is the general feeling among classical musicians that improvised music is somehow "out there" and not really relevant to what they do? For instance, every time it's broadcast on Radio 3 it's given a special programme. It hasn't really been accepted as part of the main run of the avant garde.*

**AB** Yes, that's very sad. The classical musicians probably ignore it, but I find that it's important for music in general because it's a kind of experimenting ground, a kind of lab where you find things out that can be applied in another context. Things that people discover

in this situation after some years get into the mainstream at some point. I find it quite sad that this music is not that popular, but I hope that eventually that might change. For instance, tonight's concert was entertaining. There was a lot of variety and humour. I found it interesting working with John Zorn who works in this filmic way, with things changing very quickly. On the other hand, somebody like Buckethead stays on one thing for quite a long period of time.

*I must say I found Buckethead's use of volume quite challenging, not to say controversial, judging by the reactions of some of the audience. It's the first time I've heard that loud, aggressive, dominating sound within the intricacy of free music.*

**AB** Yes, but what I find about it is that it's quite lyrical as well as being aggressive. He's always playing melodies, and it's interesting to contrast him with Derek (Bailey) who is much more of a textural player. I think it's great that all these different personalities have the opportunity to come together.

*Have you found your classical background of any use in this improvising context?*

**AB** Yes, I have. If I try to observe my own mental process when I'm improvising, all kinds of memories of things one's heard surface. I don't try to exclude any influence. I mean, in this context I've found that I play perhaps more melodically than some of the other musicians, but I don't shy away from that. I try to integrate that. What I find to be a great influence is folk music, ethnic music, which I think is in my blood, having lived with it in Romania.

*Yes, I certainly felt that that was evident in one of the duets you played with Vanessa Mackness, the other night.*

**AB** It's not intended, it's not a conscious thing, but it comes out because it's there. I don't try to shy away from that, or from tonal shadings that

**What I find to be a great influence is folk music, ethnic music, which I think is in my blood, having lived with it in Romania.**

appear in my improvising. I try to be very open. So, yes, I use my classical training to my advantage, though I can see why some people find it restrictive. In classical playing you are using this so-called 'beautiful sound' all the time. You have to free yourself from that because in improvised music you are using all kinds of sounds which classical musicians would regard as ugly, but they have their own beauty. For instance, a sound which doesn't have a definite pitch can be very beautiful.

*You've worked a good deal with the composer, Michael Nyman, who also has an eclectic sensibility in the way he draws together different types of musics from different contexts. Presumably this is one reason why you've worked with him?*

**AB** Exactly, yes. But it's also the fact that he accepts a lot of input from the musicians he works with. I feel I've contributed a lot to the sound of his music. The strings in his band, for example, are quite important. They act as a kind of rhythm section. That came as result of me working with him. Before me the sound of the strings was completely different, it was more of a baroque sound. He was using rebecs. With my influence we started to amplify the strings and get a much harder sound, a more rocky sound. In fact, in the last string quartet which Michael wrote for my Balanescu



Quartet, he included a lot of Romanian influences, Romanian melodies.

*Like Michael Nyman, who has this long-standing partnership with the writer and director, Peter Greenaway, you've also become involved in composing for film. What do you find particularly challenging about this?*

**AB** I think music should be functional. I love working with dancers as well as film and

**I think music should be functional. I love working with dancers as well as film and theatre. I'm against music as art-object where people are just sitting down and getting the music thrown at them.**

theatre. I'm against music as art-object where people are just sitting down and getting the music thrown at them. I find that music as a function for other forms works very well, especially with dance and film. Film also deals with the same problem as music which is the division of time and the perception of time. So, perhaps that's why Nyman and Greenaway have had such a successful partnership because both, being Structuralists, have always been concerned with structure, and also keeping the independence of the images and the music. I don't like film music which is subservient to the image. It should have an independent identity. I've seldom been able to work in that way because I've done a lot of music for documentaries, where obviously the music has to be subservient. But I've had the luck to work with some really talented directors like Jo Ann Kaplan (*Love Across the Wall*, 1990, Signals/



Channel 4). Even in her assignment for a documentary she manages to express great individuality and leave room for the music.

*The question I feel I must ask you because you're involved in classical music is about a certain Mr Kennedy. Is he a positive influence in classical music?*

**AB** I know Nigel very well because we were colleagues at the Julliard and I think he's extremely gifted. In a sense what he is doing is good for classical music, but it has drawbacks because he's not really doing anything new. What's new is the packaging, the way he dresses, the way his records are marketed with videos and so on. But he's not doing a new repertoire. That's rather a shame. Nigel is very intelligent and I hope that eventually he'll do that.

*Are you ready for that sort of marketing?*

**AB** I think if I was, and my quartet was, I'd like to have a big say in it. But I'm not prepared to compromise in terms of repertoire and image, although I feel the connection with an audience and the popularity is very important. I'm not against that at all, otherwise it makes a nonsense of one's work if it's not heard. I appreciate a week like this, for instance, where it's a relatively small audience, but very appreciative. **R**

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# YVES ROBERT

## *trombone*

If there is such a thing as the *nouvelle vague* in French contemporary music, then Yves Robert is certain to be part of it. Comparisons with Paul Rutherford are, I suppose, inevitable, though Robert has a voice of his own no less disciplined and inventive. He is also a natural entertainer, with a cute sense of timing and a Tatiesque eye for detail.

*How have you come to improvised music?  
From a jazz or a classical background?*

**YR** Both of them. I first studied the flute and afterwards the trombone. That was in a school of music in Vichy, France. Little by little, I listened to a lot of music. Dixieland, modern and free jazz, sometimes bebop. Now, of course, I'm very interested in free music and using improvisation as a means of composing. But when I was younger I played classical music at the school of music and for my own pleasure I played improvised music.

*Were there any musicians in France who particularly influenced you?*

**YR** Well, in order to learn I used to play along with records. So, in a sense, I played with everybody (laughs). In particular, I was influenced by Michel Portal and also Louis Sclavis. These guys taught me a lot of things. I spent several years in Lyon working with a collective called ARFI, which translates as the Association for the Research of Imaginary Folklore. There were fifteen musicians there and I worked with them all. That would have been from 1981. In fact I still belong to this organisation.

*What attracts you to playing improvised music?*

**YR** For me the first thing is to be involved in instant, immediate composition. Playing improvised music is like writing without a pen. It demands great concentration to hear everything that is happening from other musicians, and at the same time, to be playing yourself. You also have to be able to remember what has happened the second before, the minute before, and so keep in mind the shape of what's happening, how the piece is being constructed. It all depends on the people you're improvising with. Sometimes they have a very different way of working to yourself. Sometimes it might work perfectly and other times there's too much happening - too many notes, as it were. Obviously you have to adapt your way of playing depending on who you're working with.

*What is the improvised music scene like in France?*

**YR** In France it's very hard to defend this way of thinking, this style of playing. This is one of the reasons why I play mainly in other countries. Above all it's a problem of organisation and the promoters of concerts who are convinced that nobody wants to come and hear this music. But when we do have festivals where there is free music it is often crowded. It's always a struggle, though. But it's been very enjoyable to come and play in this country as part of Company.

*Could you describe some of the other projects you're currently involved in?*

**YR** My projects are all very different. I like them to be very different so that they make me think and play using a different outlook. I've got my own quartet with bass, percussion and

guitar. We play very short pieces from ten seconds to six minutes. This is a group we use for French festivals. I also have a solo career. And I have a project for tapes and voices, using stories.

*Are these stories you've written?*

**YR** No, it's another guy, a philosopher, called Jean Paul Curnier. It's a new project, it's basically about daily life, a meeting between two people and their knowledge of each other, how they get to the point where they know each other so well that they no longer have anything to say to each other. So, their only desire is that the other becomes unknown again. It's around that idea.

*Do you have a name for this project?*

**YR** (Pause) Not yet. R

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# DEREK BAILEY

## *guitar*

**Founder** of Company (1976) and co-founder of Incus Records (1970). **Jazz: The Essential Companion** (Paladin) says: "He has pursued the austere path of total improvisation and abstraction with monolithic integrity, becoming one of the masters in the field . . . his music is often alive with drama, intelligence and anarchic humour". Or, in a word: seminal.

*Most people who know you and your music will perhaps identify you solely as a musician engaged in free music, improvised music. Could you give an overview of the type of musician you were before you became involved in this music?*

**DB** My playing career started many years ago. I've been a professional musician for over forty years, I suppose. I started playing in the early 1940s and became a professional in 1950. From then on until the early 1960s I played in the usual commercial music situations - dance halls, nightclubs, touring bands and so on.

*A sort of session musician, then?*

**DB** I finished up as a session musician, yes. I was mainly working in the studios and nightclubs when I met Tony Oxley and Gavin Bryars. That would have been in 1963. It was largely through working with them that I came to free improvisation. That took a period of two-three years. At that time I had vast uncharted areas of ignorance about music. I'd never heard of John Cage, and I was not interested at all in free jazz. I was interested in being a working musician and I used to try and work in as many different areas as possible. I did virtually everything it was possible to do for a person playing my kind of instrument.

Since 1965, however, freely improvised music is all I've done. It seemed to suit me, it seems to answer my appetites, requirements.

*Moving up to the present and Company Week, I know that we're currently in the grip of a recession and that must add extra worries, but is it a problem setting up the festival? Can you rely on the necessary funding?*

**DB** No. The body that funds Company Week at the moment, that funded it this year, has just been abolished. So I don't know what's happening. I never know what's happening. I was talking to a lady, who is a promoter, who attended Company Week this year. I could tell from what she was saying that she assumed, because I'd been running it for fourteen years, that it was somehow established. It's not like that at all. Every year I've done it I've not known if there would be another one. When it first started in 1977 I had no intention to do more than one. Just to keep it going is a year by year problem. If it happens next year it will be because of finding solutions to the same problems we had to solve this year. Company Week is not a fixture on anybody's musical spectrum. The funding bodies still don't know what it is.

*What criteria do you have for selecting musicians? For example, is it necessary that you've heard them play, or do you get recommendations?*

**DB** It's not very clear, that. The selection procedure is a little bit indeterminate. A lot of it is to do with people I kind of keep in mind. For instance, Paul Lovens is somebody I could have invited any time over the last ten years, and it just worked out that this year seemed a good time because certain other people weren't there and certain other people were there. I don't just pick people on the basis of compatibility. I try to avoid a certain degree of

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familiarity. In Paul's case there was nobody that he knew that well taking part.

One of the common strands this year was recommendations. I guess that other musicians know that I look for certain kinds of people and that's how three of the musicians came. It was suggested by George Lewis that Yves Robert would be the right kind of musician for Company and then I worked with him last year in Belgium and it was obvious that he was. Buckethead I knew of from one or two directions, but mainly through Zorn. But I'd known a little bit about him because he belongs to this kind of Californian guitar world where you still get people with hair down their waist dressed like Vikings and playing guitar, loud at one million mph. And strangely enough, I have one or two connections with that world. Finally, Alex Balanescu was suggested to me by Steve Beresford. Last year, on the other hand, it was a completely different kind of week. Thirty-four people took part, some of whom I'd hardly heard about.

## **The audience have to make their own criteria, the same as the musicians. They have to build their criteria out of what they are hearing.**

*Do you have certain ways of measuring the success of a Company Week?*

**DB** Yes, I measure it by how I feel. If I feel good, it's been okay. But I've never had a Company Week so far, with maybe one exception, where I haven't felt good. I mean this is the day after the last day of Company Week and I'm sort of completely full of it. It was a fantastic week. But most of them leave me feeling like that because this is the way I like to work, and I don't easily find a way of working like this. Imagine going up to a

promoter and saying, "What I want to do is get nine musicians together and we'll all play together, we don't know what we're going to play, but we're going to play in the same place for five nights". I mean obviously they'd fetch the security guards. It's just a non-promotional idea. It offends all the tenets of music promotion, of the music business. It doesn't fit in at all.

*Yes, I think it also offends the usual patterns of consumption of the audience. The idea that you go to a concert expecting to hear music from the latest LP and a few old favourites, and you judge its value-for-money against how well things like that are delivered.*

**DB** Yes, right. The audience have to make their own criteria, the same as the musicians. They have to build their criteria out of what they are hearing. As I say, I like to work this way, but generally speaking it's not other musicians' usual way of working. I feel they are doing me a favour. I expect all these guys thought of it as a revealing week for them, quite rewarding, but I think they'll all be relieved to go back to their own pursuits, regular groups etc.

It usually takes me about six months to prepare it and then the week itself is so dense. I'm working on it all the time and I don't think I sleep much. This question of whether it's going well is beside the point. It's always going something, whether it's well or badly. The second year I did in 1978 I felt was dull. In fact I didn't do anything in '79 because of that. But it was my fault. I hadn't put enough thought into it. I even abandoned one of the concerts halfway through. There was not much happening. It was too easy, and it's got to be difficult. If you invite a bunch of guys who are going to be okay playing together, it might be all right musically, but you're not going to do what I want to do. You've got to have something to work through, and working through it leaves

me, anyway, at the end of that period, totally exhausted and usually completely satisfied.

**I see no meaningful connection between music and television. It seems to me that they are antithetical . . . they're opposites, antagonistic to each other. And music always loses out.**

*The composer, Cornelius Cardew, has said that improvisation gives rise to a sound that acts on our emotional responses subliminally, whereas other types of music work more on a cultural level. Would you go along with that?*

**DB** I've rarely read anything of Cardew's that I've fully understood. He operated on a much higher intellectual level than I'm capable of. I've found that the audiences have changed radically. I haven't found one unchanged, unified audience over the years that freely improvised music has been played. They're different in different places. When I first started playing in America I found it quite revealing. They just treated it like ordinary music. Japanese audiences are completely different. The kind of mores of their society are different, the way they come to the music, has nothing to do with improvised music.

I like listening to improvised music. I find the attraction for me is just the nakedness of the music, the nakedness of the music-making process. You can see how it's *not* working and how it *is* working, and what one guy wants it to do and what she doesn't want it to do. I think that's fantastic. I'm much more interested in that than in some individual's attempt to make the most of his latest idea. I don't find any other form of music anywhere near as interest-

ing, from a listening point of view, as improvised music. Currently, the state of composed music and of jazz seems to be singularly undemanding. You can't say that about improvised music. It does require a certain kind of creative listening, as we were saying, you do have to discover the criteria and to some extent it will be criteria that suit you, the criteria that will supply you with understanding. But also, the criteria come from the piece that's being played. So, for instance, particularly in Company concerts where you can get one piece differing quite radically from another, you might have to find a different set of criteria for each piece. Not to appreciate whether it's good or bad, but to find out what they're actually doing. I would have thought that's a demand to be welcomed by listeners.

*Finally, looking to the future. I understand that your book **Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music**, is going to be published in a revised edition and, moreover, a television series based on the book has been made by Channel 4. Perhaps you could explain the intention and scope of the series as well as your role in it?*

**DB** I worked for this film-maker, Jeremy Marre, on a programme once about working as a musician in the dance halls and after that I gave him the book that I had written in 1980 and he decided that he'd like to make some films based on it. The upshot was that he made this series of four hour-long films. They've just been completed and they're scheduled to go out in December '91 or January '92, but I think they can always change that. My role in it was completely inessential. The programmes were based on the idea of the book, but that's about as far as it went. Jeremy wanted me to be involved, but initially I had a problem with doing that. I see no meaningful connection between music and television. It seems to me that they are antithetical . . . they're opposites,



antagonistic to each other. And music always loses out. So, being closely involved in it was something I wasn't sure I could manage. But there's more to improvisation than playing a string of gigs so, as with writing the book, I thought I would try it and see what I could learn from it. My role officially was 'writer'. Mostly what I did was talk with Jeremy about improvisation.

Jeremy Marre is somebody I've really learned a lot from about improvisation. He immersed himself totally in the subject and revealed aspects to me that previously I'd either ignored or not realised. He also gave me a lot of freedom as regards what we did. For instance, I chose the musics we would cover and the people we would talk to. I wanted them to be different from the ones I'd covered in the book. I wanted to investigate one or two other areas, particularly certain African things. It was a very instructive time for me. And it was great to meet some of the musicians, such as Buddy Guy, who I'd always admired.

As time goes on and the editing process comes round, you've got these two things - you've got the subject and television. And gradually the subject turns into television, which is inevitable, of course. All kinds of things are being filmed, but eventually they have to be turned into TV programmes. And that's quite a burden to put on anything. Nevertheless, Jeremy has done a remarkable job. Regular listeners to improvised music might not learn a great deal, but I think my mother will learn something, finally, about what I do for a living. It's basically a broad approach. It's saying that improvisation is the most pervasive activity in music, that it's everywhere and involved in virtually all music. We go all over the world: Africa, India, America, Scotland, Spain. Like a lot of arts programmes it's something of a cultural travelogue, but I think Jeremy did a remarkable job in getting such an elusive thing as improvisation on TV at all. I'm very pleased with it. Chuffed, as they used to say. **R**

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